

The Implications of China's Leadership Succession for the United States

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Your Honors,

I appreciate the opportunity to address this panel today. China's leadership changes are the subject of worldwide concern. Leadership successions in authoritarian regimes bring with them not only the risk of political instability, but also the possibility of liberalizing change. It is this combination of fear and hope that makes them of such relevance to the world community. China's upcoming handover of power from the so-called "Third Generation" of leaders under Jiang Zemin to the "Fourth Generation" under Hu Jintao is no different. Coming at a time when China is an emerging world power, both economically and politically, the stakes are even higher.

In this brief, I would like to outline four aspects of the succession which I feel are of particular concern to the United States and its allies. My views are informed significantly by a compilation of internal dossiers of the Chinese Communist Party that were used in the succession and will be published in the U.S. later this year.* My purpose is to help the U.S. and other governments to act in such a way so as to enhance the well-being of China's people, living as they do under a system which does not meet globally accepted minimal standards of freedom or justice.

1. A Smooth Succession? The handover of the CCP's general secretaryship to Hu Jintao may be the first smooth succession of a communist party that did not require the death or purge of an incumbent. Some have interpreted this as a sign of the CCP's resilience. I disagree with that assessment. The transition was characterized by a last-minute attempt by the retiring Jiang Zemin to prevent a leading liberal, Li Ruihuan, from joining the new leadership and by an allocation of seats on the new Politburo Standing Committee on a strictly factional basis. Merit has increase in importance within the CCP but remains secondary to

factional allegiance. Norms of conduct at the elite level remain weak at best. In light of this, the U.S. government should continue to view the CCP as a weak and unstable regime which suffers from the same shortcomings of all non-democratic governments. The U.S. should pursue a long-term policy of engagement with China that thinks beyond the CCP and does not invest excessively in its top leadership. It should continue to look and talk over the heads of the CCP directly to China's people.

2. The role of the military: Those appearing today have been asked to address the role of the military in the succession. My simple answer is that the role was minimal if not absent entirely. China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has undergone a radical de-politicization in the past decade which culminated in the 16th congress changeover. There was virtually no military voice in the succession discussions, except to a very small degree on the issue of Jiang Zemin's retirement from the position of chairman of the Central Military Commission. The expected new executive vice chairman of the CMC, Cao Gangchuan, and the expected new Chief of Staff, Guo Boxiong, are both advocates of an increasingly professional and specialized military. The new CCP General Secretary, Hu Jintao, has worried aloud in internal meetings about the de-politicization of the military, because it portends the emergence of a coercive force which will not stand with the Party when it perceives that its own interests and those of the state lie with political change. This process, which potentially helps smooth the way towards democracy, is one which the U.S. should encourage through direct military-to-military exchanges with the PLA.
3. The intentions of the new leaders. While the new leadership generally shares the authoritarian, if not totalitarian, predilections of the outgoing leadership, they are more open to changes on the margins of the current political system. In particular, some of them favor the expansion of direct elections of government officials -- although under closely controlled conditions -- as far as the provincial-level. There is an interest in widening the limits of press freedom. On foreign policy, they believe they are in strategic competition with the US but see value in détente for economic and political reasons in terms of China's emergence into world power.

They see no reason to loosen controls on Tibet or Xinjiang, but are interested in practical solutions to reduce grievances there. In short, there is the emergence of a soft and modern authoritarianism. By itself, that is not a cause for celebration. But it may lead to some marginal improvement in freedoms and justice for many of China's people. The U.S. should be fully engaged in economic, cultural, local government, welfare, environmental, and judicial areas, among others, to ensure this loosening or search for practical solutions to problems is not left wanting for advice and assistance.

4. The "unintentions" of the new leaders. Authoritarian regimes the world over have typically found themselves facing a crisis of governance as their societies become more open and empowered by economic change and international opening. That is certainly the case with China today. In such cases, it is the "unintended" policies of the regime that may be more important than their stated policy aims. We should understand their unstated attitudes towards the kinds of unorthodox solutions that might be considered in a domestic political crisis, such as the Tiananmen protests of 1989. Unlike 1989, China's political picture is no longer dominated by conservative party Elders who fought in the civil war for communist rule. At the same time, Fourth Generation is a group of pragmatists with a weak and mainly rhetorical commitment to communism. In case of crisis, new leaders like Zeng Qinghong, Wen Jiabao, Xi Jinping, and Li Changchun will likely be willing to embrace political liberalization in order to stave off popular overthrow. The only viscerally anti-liberal voice in the new leadership is Luo Gan, a protegee of outgoing hard-liner Li Peng. In light of this, the U.S. and its allies must proceed in such a way as to allow political liberalization to be grasped when the inevitable crisis arises, mainly by acting in such a way as to reduce threat perceptions towards China and indicating that it would be a friend and supporter of a liberalizing regime.

In summary, China's new leadership is one which brings significant hope for positive changes in domestic governance and international stability. The U.S. should act so as to encourage those changes, avoiding unnecessary legitimization with the new leadership while also realizing that their decisions and their presence will also be part

of the solution. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

* The Chinese-language book on which the dossiers are based is Zong Hairen, *Disidai (The Fourth Generation)* (Mirror Books), while an English presentation of the materials is Andrew J. Nathan and Bruce Gilley, *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* (New York Review of Books). A summary of the English book is contained in Andrew J. Nathan and Bruce Gilley, "China's New Rulers", two parts, *New York Review of Books*, September and October 2002 (attached).